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# Commentary on Cramer

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**In Response to:** Peter Cramer's *Arts Controversies and the Problem of the Public Sphere*

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The problem of the public sphere is a problem which is not specific to argumentation theory but speaks to the essence of philosophy conceived of as reasoned intervention in matters of fundamental social and political concern. The problem of the public sphere, then, is really a problem of public philosophy. In shedding light on how the public sphere is or could be constituted, philosophy at the same time sheds light on its own public relevance. The strength of Cramer's paper lies in its simultaneous disclosure of the principles which ought to govern cultural controversies and the abiding significance of philosophy, if not to the resolution of those controversies, then at least to their proper comprehension. Its weakness owes not to any intrinsic problems, but more to the situation of philosophy in a society where information is by and large controlled by media whose interest lies in managing controversy for its own ends, not with providing content for serious-minded democratic deliberation.

Philosophy, committed by its nature and its history to engagement with matter of pressing public concern, seems thwarted time and again by the tendentious and dogmatic character of normative controversy. The examples which Cramer delineates are paradigm cases of the failure of public debate to live up to, or even to address, the principles of reasonability which ought to govern public debate in a democratic society. The clashes over public funding of the arts in the U.S. Manifest an intense attachment to private agendas on all sides and little concern with advancing public reasons for those agendas. As Cramer shows, this owes to a general failure to reflect on what principles ought to govern democratic debate or, as he puts it, on how the public sphere is or ought to be constituted in a democratic society.

The models of the public that Cramer surveys all suffer from the same flaw. In each case, theorists of the public ask only 'who' makes up the public and not 'what conditions or practices constitute the public *sphere*.' Whether the public is conceived of monolithically or as a collection of particular identities or interest groups, whether it is assumed to be enlightened or in need of enlightenment, the protagonists in the debates he examines all take the problem to be one of simply getting the public or publics to speak, as opposed to how they ought to speak if they want to constitute a public in the democratic sense of the term.

Cramer sheds light on the formal conditions which structure the public sphere in a democratic society by drawing on the work of Habermas. For Habermas, there are both historical and formal enabling conditions for a genuine public sphere. Historically, modernization separated out the spheres of politics and economy and freed both from the tyrannizing influence of substantive notions of the good. This separation of spheres made possible a middle realm between politics and economy, structured by freedom of association and speech, which Habermas variously calls the public sphere or civil society. Debate in this sphere is ideally conducted by means of what Habermas calls 'communicative action.' As opposed to instrumental or strategic action, both of which try to produce agreement by *quid pro quo*, communicative action reaches agreement by the mutual exchange of reasons. 'Reason' for Habermas means evidence or ground for accepting some claim as true or justified which could in principle be accepted by a third party who does not necessarily accept the same substantive principles. To say then that 'Piss Christ' is immoral is not to advance a reason, because not

everyone has the same moral beliefs as Jesse Helms. To say, on the other hand, that art funded by the public ought not to offend anyone in the public is a reason that could in principle be accepted by others, even those who do not share Helm's antediluvian moral beliefs. Ideally, controversies would be resolved through the give and take of reasons between citizens who disagreed on substance but remained committed to an ideal of democratic citizenship and not simply to winning the debate.

Cramer uses Habermas to good effect in exposing the deficiencies of the controversies over the arts and, by extension, of the character of public debate generally. At present, the public sphere is structured not so much by the exchange of reasons as by the mutually uncomprehending clash of private agendas. However, he, along with Habermas, perhaps overlooks or downplays the other side of the problem of the public sphere. Cramer, following Habermas, focuses on the formal conditions constituting the public sphere in a democratic society. Reasoned debate, however, depends not only on a commitment to the formal presuppositions of communicative action, but also on having access to content out of which reasons can be developed. The information sources from which citizens draw content for their positions are today primarily controlled by the mass media, which is not as interested in advancing the cause of democratic debate as it is with selling audiences to advertisers. The content of debates, regardless of the formal principles which govern them, is thus too often conducted at the level of clichés and slogans, which is all the media seem willing to disseminate. This diagnosis can be confirmed by paying attention to casual conversations one might encounter in the course of the day. The arguments ordinary citizens engage in on buses or in bars often simply repeat media-generated banalities, to the detriment of original thinking and reasoned exchange of positions.

The upshot of this claim for argumentation theory in particular and public philosophy in general is that both must pay attention to the concrete dynamics of information flow and the political and economic interests that govern those dynamics. Argument, especially democratic argument, is about more than conformity to formal presuppositions, it is also about developing reasoned and original content. To the extent that the parameters and content of debate are controlled by forces outside of the public sphere, to that extent is the democratic nature of the public sphere compromised. Hence, the development of a genuine public sphere requires attention to the formal conditions of democratic debate to which Cramer draws our attention, but it also must involve a critique of the ways in which the media insidiously structure and limit the content of positions up for discussion.